

Post-*Cheonan* Regional Security: Where do we go from here (PRC Perspective)¹

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I. China's Foreign Relations in Northeast Asia

China's strategy toward Northeast Asia has mainly been characterized by the principle of "hiding capacities and biding time" while diplomacy of "being able to accomplish something" plays only an ancillary role. China's diplomacy more focused on maintaining the status quo in the Northeast Asia region. This stands in stark contrast to the active nature of China's current diplomacy, shown since the 2008-09 global financial crisis. However, after the *Cheonan* incident, serious debates on China's foreign policy in the region are on the rise.

When discussing China's strategy toward Northeast Asia, the most elementary questions are how Northeast Asia is composed as a geographical space and whether "Northeast Asia strategy" is being included as part of China's regional strategy.

The answer to the first question is that there is currently no consensus on defining the Northeast Asia region in geographical terms in China. However, generally speaking, in addition to South and North Korea and Japan, regions in the northeastern part of China, eastern part of the Amur River in Russia, Taiwan, as well as in the east of Mongol are usually referred to as Northeast Asia. Given that the majority of the above-mentioned regions are currently in inseparable relations with the U.S. in terms of both international politics and geopolitics, it is expected to be difficult to exclude the U.S. In this region, there is currently a mix of great powers and small to middle powers, surrounding the eastern and northern part of China from the South and the North, and the division between the continent and the islands makes the shape of the region even more complicated.

Regarding the second question, it would be fair to claim that there exists no such thing as China's foreign policy strategy that recognizes those above-mentioned regions as a single unit. Although there was a brief period during which China separately classified the Northeast Asia region into two regions

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and recognized those as two opposing blocs of the Cold War, the so-called Northeast Asia's "Cold War" structure of "Northern triangle and Southern triangle" no longer exists as China has begun to establish a strategic cooperation with the U.S. since the early 70s in its recognition of the Soviet Union as the greatest threat. Although China has, since then, been developing various forms of bilateral relations with Japan, Russia, the U.S., as well as with South and North Korea, and referring to them as "Northeast Asia diplomacy" for the sake of convenience, it didn't pursue a strategy of regional diplomacy with a clear distinction and consistency.

In China's diplomatic terms, the Northeast Asia region is where diplomacies toward great powers and neighboring states are simultaneously making their presence. By adopting the policy of "reform and opening-up," China has attached the greatest importance to creating an international environment that is conducive for pursuing an economic development. Especially, when China was isolated from the Western powers after the 1989 Tiananmen incident, diplomacy with its neighboring states has become the center of China's diplomacy with an aim to, eventually, escape from the international isolation and also secure enough of political and economic buffer zones. Amongst them, building of friendly and cooperative relations with the so-called Northeast Asian countries has been greatly emphasized, and China has, since then, continued to develop such bilateral relations in the region. Following the formal logic, the order of importance in China's diplomatic relations could be summarized as the followings: China-Russia > China-South Korea > China-North Korea > China-Japan > China-United States. However, the reality of China's diplomatic relations is entangled around far more complex degree of interests than formality alone can adequately describe.

The Northeast Asia region, in China's diplomacy, has transformed from being a space for security competition to a space for economic development after the 1990s, and began to be gradually recognized as the space for not only achieving geopolitical security but expanding geo-economic cooperation and development as well. China is currently working toward creating geo-strategic space which combines the geo-political and geo-economic space. China's new understanding of the Northeast Asian space is likely to be related with its previous decision to adopt the "New Security Concept," which reflects the changes made since the mid-90s in China's understanding of global issues. Through its "non zero-sum" approach toward diplomacy, which avoids conflicts and, instead, promotes cooperation, China has begun to recognize its relations with both world powers and neighboring states with a more flexible and wide view. This recognition embodies what Deng Xiaoping emphasized, namely the principle of "hiding capacities and biding time," reflects the geo-economics oriented way of thinking as compared to the security-focused thoughts in the past, and is based on the positive assessment of the space for economic

cooperation. Therefore, Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia begin to be recognized not as a completely separated space but rather as a strategic space where the two can be mutually connected with each other within one large framework.

China has turned its diplomacy into a more active one with an aim to, in the end, loosen the status quo in the Southeast Asia region while continuing to maintain the status quo in Northeast Asia. Entering the 21st century, it appears that in China's foreign policies, the Northeast Asia region is found lower down the priority ladder than the Southeast Asia region. This trend is also reflected in the officials in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For example, *Hu Zhengyue*, who is currently serving as the Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China and worked as the director general for the Asia Department from 2006 to 2008, and *Yang YanYi*, the current director general for the Asia Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, are typical experts on the Southeast Asia region with no connection to Northeast Asia. By making its use of success from the Southeast Asian diplomacy, China has been seeking to gradually spread out positive perception of China, thereby establishing its image, at the end, as the great power.

The most annoying diplomatic issues in the Northeast Asia region for China are the cross-straits relations and the North Korean nuclear problem, with the U.S. standing behind those two problems. Entering the 21st century, China has moved away from an aggressive method of threatening Taiwan to a unification policy that is more appeasement oriented with a mid- to long-term outlook. The specifics of this policy transformation have been paradoxically reflected in China's "Anti-Secession Law" which was enacted in 2005. After that, China, based on its cooperation with the U.S., adopted the policy of restraining the Taiwanese efforts toward independence. Since 2008, China has been relatively successful in stabilizing the cross-strait relations when *Ma Ying-jeou* of the Kuomintang (KMT), who supports improving the relations with China rather than the independence of the island, came to power.

However, the North Korean nuclear problem which occurred in 2002 presented a significant challenge to China's diplomacy in the Northeast Asia region. This challenge had a potential to add substantial instability to the U.S.-China relations, which China values the most among others, and also damage China's image as a foreign cooperation partner and negatively influence its national development strategy. The North Korean nuclear problem, however, did bring about the effect of improving the China's diplomacy in Northeast Asia at least for the time being. The North Korean nuclear crisis has become an issue that requires daily attention of the vice Foreign Minister, and as well as one of the key issues of concern to be considered by a top Chinese official. However, China's such response is not rooted in the commonly perceived notion that North Korea's strategic value is rather high based on the special relationship of

alliance between the two countries. In fact, from the Chinese perspective, North Korea's strategic value has been reduced, and China works on transforming the relationship with North Korea from "a special relationship" to "a normal state-to-state relationship" under Hu's leadership.

II. *Cheonan* Incident and China's Approaches

1. China's Initial Position

The *Cheonan* incident has presented China with a serious dilemma regarding its foreign policies, specifically its Northeast Asian policies. Despite its disapproval and resentment towards DPRK's second nuclear test on May 2005, China has oriented its foreign policies with the aim of promoting stability and status-quo on the Korean Peninsula by differentiating its North Korean *nuclear* policies from its North Korea policies. China's reaction reflects the importance of the stability on the Korean Peninsula on its economic rise and its relations with the United States. Unlike the "normal" North Korean nuclear issues, which could be dealt with relative steadfastness through China-U.S. cooperation, the *Cheonan* incident has the potential to destabilize the Korean Peninsula. It could also undermine China's diplomacy towards becoming a global superpower and disturb the strategic understanding within Northeast Asia.

As a result, divisions within the Chinese departments and among experts have grown more severe. China's diplomatic service department pleads caution on the part of China for its diplomatic relations with the U.S. and Korea, the global perception of China, and its responsibilities as a rising superpower are major factors. It also urges for a solution in accordance to international law. On the other hand, individuals within the liaison department and the Chinese military, those who are embedded with the traditional thinking of the Korean Peninsula and those who value China's relations with North Korea, contend that China must prioritize China's position within Northeast Asia and must not isolate North Korea any further.

In dealing with the *Cheonan* crisis, China most likely considered the following criteria. Firstly, China must direct its policies toward its ultimate goal of maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula. Secondly, China must resolve the *Cheonan* crisis through China-U.S. cooperation. Thirdly, China must consider its international reputation in dealing with the crisis. Fourthly, China's stance must not threaten the survival of the North Korean regime. This stems from the Chinese distrust of South Korea that it believes is threatening the North Korean regime via the incident. Fifthly, China must not jeopardize its relations with South Korea. Lastly, China must manage North Korea's efforts to mitigate security on the Korean Peninsula.

From China's perspective, the best scenario would involve resolving the

crisis through inter-Korean relations, resuming the Six-Party Talks through China-U.S. relations, and managing North Korea's nuclear issues. It would have been difficult for China to remain silent on the issue if irrefutable proof of North Korea's actions were uncovered.

2. China's Responses

China addressed the issue with a three-level approach: verification of the truth, formulation of a resolution through internal discussions, and implementation of the resolution with international cooperation.

China's approach to the crisis can be broken into two stages. The first stage encompasses the period between the sinking of the ship and prior to the announcement of the joint U.S.-ROK naval exercises on the Yellow Sea. The second stage encompasses events subsequent to the announcement of the joint naval exercises.

a. Initial Response

During the initial stages of the crisis, China responded passively. The lack of information, the distrust of South Korean intent, the significance of the strategic implications underlined in the development of the crisis, distrust of the offensive capabilities of the Chinese and North Korean navies, and the conservative nature of China's policy-making process are considered the biggest factors for China's passive role during this initial stage.

In response to the crisis, China's intent was to remain objective. Key members of China's diplomatic service department, Ning Fukui and Hu Zhengyue among others, have helped maintain an amicable atmosphere and when Wen Jiabao visited South Korea on May 28, China has confirmed its intent to help realize justice. China has emphasized objective continuation of investigation which has stemmed from its goal to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula and to adhere to its responsibilities as a rising superpower. Examples of China's attitude can be seen in the May 24 China-U.S. strategic economic dialogue, May 26 editorial on the Global Times, and May 28 Wen Jiabao statement.

China's seriousness was also seen in Hu Jintao's direct questioning of Kim Jong-il during Kim's three-day visit to China on May 3 in regards to North Korea's involvement in the sinking of the South Korean vessel. It is reported that Kim Jong-il vehemently denied North Korean involvement. Rather, he requested China's J-10 fighter and T-84 battle tank, along with economic aid. China has since rejected this request and attained its objective of "strategic

communication through internal decision,” verifying China’s intentions to intervene in North Korean affairs. At the same time, China urged North Korea to react responsibly in an editorial of the *Global Times*.

In regards to the *Cheonan* situation, China has misgivings towards North Korea but has yet to corroborate them with hard evidence, and thus has been unable to resolve the issue. The results of the Russian investigative team have further consolidated China’s position as such.

With the *Cheonan* situation in a deadlock, however, the international society has come to see China as North Korea’s benefactor, and China, not wanting to jeopardize its relations with South Korea and considering the latter as the victim of the *Cheonan* situation, has negotiated with South Korea and the United States and issued a presidential statement through the UN Security Council in order to expedite the closure of the whole situation. And China has since revealed its desire to reinstate the six-party talks.

b. The Aftermath

Attention mounted on China’s post-*Cheonan* reactions only after the ROK-US Combined Forces’ military exercise plans were announced. This indicates that the *Cheonan* situation is not only revolving around the two Koreas but has evolved to become a playing field for China and the United States. How China and the United States handle the situation will lead to significant consequences in the post-*Cheonan* Northeast Asian security issues.

After announcing the ROK-US Combined Forces military exercise on May 24th in the Yellow Sea in response to North Korea’s actions, the Chinese military’s influence on the matter was fortified while also leading a hard-line position against South Korea and the US by triggering Chinese patriotism and nationalism. During the past twenty years, the Chinese military has enjoyed continuous budgetary allocation increase in high proportions. But in 2010, the military was allocated an eight percent budget increase and the treatment of most of the military officers was largely affected. The China-Taiwan relations which had previously taken up the largest proportion in military expenditure were improved and stabilized, and the China-US cooperative relationship was strengthened, leading to a seemingly diminished position of the Chinese military both in resource allocation and political clout. The post-*Cheonan* ROK-US Combined Forces military exercises have given the Chinese military the pretext to reinforce its footing, and it is clearly making good use of the situation.

China’s hard-line attitude towards South Korea and the US can be interpreted through various channels: as President Hu Jintao faces imminent transfer of power, it is not easy for the government to control the influence of

the military which uses nationalism as a control mechanism; politicians connected with the transfer of power to the next generation of Chinese leadership are collaborating with the military; China is testing the US's will in an opportunistic way.

On July 1st, Deputy Chief Ma Xiaotian of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Chief of Staff expressed "vehement opposition" to the ROK-US Combined Forces military exercises prior to any department or leader had done so. On the following 5th, Major General Luo Yuan of the Military Science Association revealed his aggression by referring to the ROK-US Combined Forces fleet as a "live target." On the other hand, Qin Gang, spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, referred to the exercises as a matter of "close interest" rather than opting for the expression "vehement opposition" on the 6th of July. But on the 8th, the Foreign Ministry officially embraced Ma Xiaotian's statement of regarding the exercise with "vehement opposition," and during a press conference on the 13th, stated that the Yellow Sea military exercises were a provocation against "China's core interests."

At the same time, Chinese mass media is invoking the public's patriotism and nationalism by headlining the remarks of various military leaders who interpret the Yellow Sea exercises as the U.S.'s attempt to keep in check and intentionally humiliate the Chinese people. The media is also arousing anti-South Korean sentiments as it propagandizes the notion that South Korea has formed in allegiance with the U.S. to serve the latter's interest. The *Global Times*, which has close ties to the *People's Daily*, conducted a poll on what position China should take in dealing with South Korea resulting in 95 percent of participants replying in the positive that South Korea should be forced to submit to China. It seems that this state of affairs will continue on for some time, leaving behind an aftereffect within China and in China-Korea relations.

c. Tentative Conclusion

The *Cheonan* situation poses significant meaning to South Korea because it could become one of the most important data in analyzing North Korean related issues including sudden changes that could affect the country. In the process of handling the *Cheonan* situation, the two countries had to remain satisfied with merely averting the total demolition of all relations. Considering the recent and consistent developments in China-South Korean relations initiated by the Lee Myung-bak Government such as establishing strategic partnerships with China, reinitiating strategic conversation between the two countries, and working towards the possibility of agreeing on a free trade agreement, the outcome is far beneath what would have been otherwise expected. South Korea and China have not been able to reach any sort of mutual understanding or significant

agreement in dealing with the *Cheonan* issue and went about separately in trying to resolve the problem.

There are a few particular points to be examined regarding the incident. First of all, the inter-Korean relationship changed into the tug of war between the U.S. and China. Second, China elevated their national interests as their core interests abroad for the first time. Previously in July of 2009, the Chinese government demanded its U.S. counterpart to respect: (1) security of its Communist regime and system, (2) national sovereignty and preservation of its territories, and (3) sustainability of its economic developments. These points reflect the fact the two countries set up strategic partnership based on respect of each other's interests. The Cheonan Incident now becomes a barometer of the two countries' relationships in the future, burdening the U.S. government that needs support from China in its foreign policy.

It seems that much debate goes on inside Beijing at present. Traditionalist hawks argue that U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea are hard to break apart and that China needs to counter the U.S. and allies by forging closer ties with India and Russia. In this case, China will consider North Korea as one of its important allies to prevent U.S. dominance; hence, China will take measures to strengthen its "special ties" with the reclusive regime.

Second, doves hold that despite some differences between China and the U.S., the two countries still have space for cooperation and negotiations. Supposing that China will be a regional power in Northeast Asia in foreseeable future, they claim that China's major competitor would be Japan, rather than the U.S. If this is the case, then, China will pursue foreign policy, which aims to weaken ROK-Japan relationships.

Third, realists in developed countries see China as a rising power, second to the U.S. and that Chinese will collide head-on with the U.S. inevitably. If China aspires to be a hegemonic power in Asia, it will take more active foreign policy to alienate Korea and Japan from the U.S.

4. Post-Cheonan International Relations in Northeast Asia in Chinese perspectives

It is likely that the U.S. and China will undergo the long process of considerable tension, confrontation, and negotiations in coming years. The U.S., which assumes a leading role in the world as well as in Northeast Asia, will try not to be overwhelmed by China. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton recently remarked to warn Chinese expansionist motives in ASEAN conference cannot be merely seen as diplomatic reassurance for small countries afraid of China; it was a clearly warning to China's pursuit of influence.

Highest leaders and top strategists within Beijing will attempt to avoid

fundamental clashes with the U.S. They will do so because they clearly aware of consequences of continuing tension with the U.S. Also, the current Communist regime does not possess political stability and durability to endure protracted years of stand-off against the superpower. Chinese regime will rather pursue policy, attempting to take control of excessive patriotism of Chinese. Despite the effort, the implications of the incident will give huge, negative impact on China, which was expected in an earlier scenario.

In this context, China will maintain a principle of balanced diplomacy, not siding with any of the two Koreas. Despite its deep distrust of the Lee administration and clashes with South Korea over the Incident, China will at least consider rapprochement with South Korean government in official levels and restrain harsh criticisms of South Korea.

With respect to North Korea, the Chinese government will continue to build up stronger ties with North Korea with its principle of looking at North Korea and its nuclear program separately. Also, the country will adopt policy to continue to increase its say in the Six-Party Talks and matters pertaining to North Korea.

III. Implications for Korea's Foreign Policy

Given the history, strategic interests, and power configuration of the evolving strategic schools in China's Foreign Policy even after the *Cheonan* Incident, China is not likely to take any serious initiative on the North Korean Issues as well as security issues in Northeast Asia in the near future. China will cautiously pay attention to changing regional security situations, in particular, special attention to the US policies although there must be unpleasant exchanges in defining "core interests" in the region between the US and China. In this regard, China policy can rather be regarded as a dependant variable to the US policy.

After all, South Korea's foreign policy will be influenced by regional configuration of international relations, most importantly the US-China relations. In a long-term perspective, there are five security templates in the region: US-Japan cooperation to check China, US-Japan & US-China cooperation and China-Japan conflict, multi-bilateral cooperation & soft-balancing, multi-security cooperation, and unstable balance situation. No matter which situation becomes a regional security template, it will also tremendously influence foreign policies of each country in the region. Given the current regional security situation, the basic trend is moving from the scenario of US-Japan cooperation to check China in the early 21st Century, through that of the US-Japan & US-China cooperation and China-Japan competition, and to that of multi-bilateral cooperation and soft-balancing.

Given the current degree of the US-China strategic cooperation, new Japanese government must be in dilemma, which requires an adjustment of its foreign policy direction. Under the new US-China *entente cordiale*, the strategic value of Japan to the US is likely to wane. Japan may seek the Sino-Japanese cooperation more seriously, instead of taking “the US-Japan & US-China Cooperation/ China-Japan Conflict” option. In that case, the security environment in Northeast Asia may provide a window of opportunity for multi-bilateral cooperation scenario and eventually multi-security cooperation scenario from the “US-Japan Cooperation to Check China” situation.

Under the circumstance, South Korea would be left out with no alternative but to work closely with both the US and China, because both countries have respective role, capacity, and will to influence Korean issues including the North Korea nuclear crisis as well as crucial issues in the World.² Under the current threats of North Korean nuclear weapons, the ROK-US alliance must be the pillar for South Korean security architecture. However, South Korean support for China is also relevant to transforming the six-party framework into a regional security forum and establishing a peace regime on the Korean peninsula.³

As China’s strategic ideas evolve, uncertainties in China’s future foreign policy direction still exist in foreigner’s eyes. Such a complicated situation in the future would be a great challenge to South Korea. South Korea must constantly prepare for future transformation of regional politics, in particular, China’s policy towards Korean peninsula.

In sum, when the security template in the region is moving toward a multi-bilateral cooperation situation, Seoul’s foreign policy will have more opportunity to realize its policy objectives. However, the future relationship between South Korea and China is still open to question. No matter how the structural situation and variables are favorable to a positive relation between the two countries, construction of a stable and reliable relation will be impossible without prudent policies and incessant efforts between the two countries.

² Although South Korea’s mediating role between the two great powers is not an easy task, should more positive circumstances arise, such a role by South Korea should not be an excluded option. See Wang Jisi, “China’s Search for Stability With America”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 5 (Sep/Oct, 2005), pp. 39-48.

³ For the necessity of a framework to maintain stability in the Korean peninsula, see James Goodby, “Creating a peace regime in Korea”, *PacNet* No. 23 (Honolulu: Pacific Forum CSIS, May 30, 2006), http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,3268/; Leon V. Sigal, “Building a Peace Regime in Korea: An American View”, *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2006), pp. 30-52; In-Gon Yeo, “Search for Peaceful Resolution of the North Korean Nuclear Issue”, *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2006), pp. 53-65.